TL 3833

Report on a Visit to East Timor

(18-23 May 1996)

1. On behalf of the National Council of Churches in Australia, a team of four church leaders has made a pastoral visit to the churches of East Timor. While previously individuals, groups and even a team from the World Council of Churches and Christian Conference of Asia have visited one or another of those churches, this was the first visit **from** an ecumenical body embracing both Roman Catholics and Protestants **to** both the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches there.

2. The proposal for such a visit emerged during a WCC/CCA sponsored consultation on the churches' concern for East Timor, held in Hong Kong in December 1994. The NCCA, unlike the WCC or the CCA or indeed most national ecumenical bodies in the region, includes both Catholic and Protestant churches within its membership, so an Australian initiative seemed appropriate. The NCCA's General Secretary ascertained from both Bishop Belo [Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese of Dili] and the Revd Arlindo Marcal [Moderator of the Christian Church of East Timor] that such a visit would be welcome, and from the then Military Commander of East Timor that he would place no obstacle in the way, and the NCCA Executive then asked that plans be put in train. Those who represented the NCCA were Archbishop John Bathersby [Roman Catholic, Brisbane], Archbishop Ian George [Anglican, Adelaide], Dr Jill Tabart [President, Uniting Church] and the Revd David Gill [General Secretary, NCCA]. Arrangements were coordinated by the Revd Arlindo Marcal [Christian Church of East Timor] assisted by Fr Domingos Sequeira [Chancellor, Diocese of Dili], and the visit was facilitated by the Communion of Churches in Indonesia - not least through the presence of one of its staff, Mrs Stein Jalil, as interpreter.

3. This was first and foremost a visit to the churches. The team tried to listen and to gain understanding. Through our words, but more by our presence, we tried to say that the churches of Australia have not forgotten the people and the churches of East Timor. Our motivation was pastoral, as we sought to hear what is in the hearts of our brothers and sisters in Christ. In all this, we sought to embody an ecumenical commitment which, it seemed to us, carried special significance for the East Timorese situation.

ACTIVITIES AND CONTACTS

4. The team owes much to the Moderator of the Christian Church of East Timor and his colleague the Revd Francisco de Vasconcelos, who shepherded us throughout the visit. A major disappointment was the absence of Bishop Belo, who had been called to Rome some days earlier. We were, however, able to speak briefly with his Vicar General and spend some very welcome time with the Chancellor of the diocese [Fr Domingos Sequeira].

5. The team attended [and Archbishop Bathersby presided at] a celebration of the Eucharist at Sacred Heart of Jesus parish, Becora, visited three satellite congregations in the same parish and spoke at some length with the parish clergy. We also worshiped with the Hosana [Dili] congregation of the Christian Church of East Timor. There were visits to the new [RC] junior seminary in Dili, to parishes up-country in Liquisa and the Ermera region, to the East Timorese development agency ETADEP [Florentino Sarmento and Gillman dos Santos], to the Vice Governor [Gen Arie Wibowo], the Military Commander [Col M Simbolon] and the head of religious affairs in the province. The NCCA team also stopped at Santa Cruz cemetery [scene of the tragedy on 12 November 1991] and at the Australian war memorial in the hills behind Dili. Conversations with visiting British diplomats and a representative of US Aid proved useful.

6. By happy coincidence, the visit took place during what Australia's churches observe as the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. It was a moment of special significance when, on the last afternoon in Dili, the team paused to join in the prayers that were being used by many groups around Australia.

SOME IMPRESSIONS OF THE CHURCHES

7. Church life in East Timor is striking. Services of worship are packed to overflowing, young people attend in droves, membership is increasing and morale seems high. The Catholic Church, in particular, enjoys a special place in the hearts of the ET people, and that plus its numerical strength makes it a force to be reckoned with. The much smaller Christian Church of East Timor, broadly Reformed in ethos, at one stage drew most of its members from elsewhere in Indonesia but it too is embracing increasing numbers of indigenous East Timorese. Smaller still is the Pentecostal community, which we gather comes almost entirely from outside East Timor and with which we had no contact.

8. Relations between Catholics and Protestants seem friendly at the top, but distant [or worse] at other levels. The complications are partly historic, going back to rivalries between Dutch and Portuguese colonial interests in the archipelago; partly political, reflecting different relationships with the indigenous people on the one hand and the military/economic/political/administrative power structure on the other; partly just a reflection of the delayed impact locally of global ecumenical developments. The fact that we were a team embracing Catholics as well as Protestants, from a Council embracing both, was remarked upon many times by those to whom we spoke, and the Protestant and Catholic leaders who had cooperated to organise our visit both expressed the hope that such cooperation between them would continue and increase.

9. Both churches are in the [to us] curious position of receiving substantial funding from the Indonesian government for specifically religious activities like building churches. At the same time, the leaders of both churches in ET are outspoken in criticising the government that signs the cheques. There seems to be no great reticence about biting the hand that feeds!

10. Relations with Muslims are a source of irritation. For the government, increased Islamic presence in ET is the logical consequence of integration, reflecting as it does population movements that are normal within Indonesia as a whole. For many Christians, however, it is evidence of an intent to Islamicize what has hitherto been a "Christian" culture. This issue, like many others, cannot be seen in East Timorese terms alone. Whatever is happening within the province must be seen in the light of the larger movements and policy shifts that may be taking place nationwide, as the various forces and interest groups in Jakarta bob and weave in preparation for the eventual presidential transition and the possible emergence of new constellations of power.

SOME IMPRESSIONS OF WIDER ISSUES

11. On the surface, according to some observers, Dili now is somewhat less tense, the security surveillance less intrusive, the military presence less obvious. Whether the same could be said of other towns and villages we simply do not know. We were told that last year's "ninja" terror squads, widely suspected of having had links with the armed forces, have ceased operations. We also heard, however, that people still disappear without trace and violations of human rights still occur. We also saw evidence of a marked distrust of military personnel by East Timorese civilians. The atmosphere may be more relaxed, but it would be dangerous to take any such relaxation for granted and naive to assume that the underlying causes of tension have all evaporated.

12. Over and above the difficulties peculiar to ET, there are local variants of problems found in many developing countries. Young people drift to the towns and finish schooling but cannot find jobs. Capital flows in, but for projects that benefit investors not necessarily the locals. Poor landholders around Dili are displaced by large-scale development projects and forced into the mountains. There are mutterings about corruption in high places. Discontent simmers, adding to the pressure for a different kind of relationship between the people and the authorities.

13. We heard a range of views of what should happen in the future. Some clearly envisage political independence for East Timor. Some speak more vaguely of autonomy, perhaps in the context of a continuing relationship of some kind with Jakarta. Some just want to seize on the gains that have been made or are in prospect, to get the best deal possible for East Timorese people within the political status quo. Even so, a comment from several sides was to the effect that if a referendum were held tomorrow some ninety percent of the East Timorese would vote for independence. East Timor's "integration" into the Republic of Indonesia may be a legal *fait accompli* in the eyes of Jakarta, but we saw little evidence to suggest that it is anywhere near *accompli* in the hearts of the people.

14. Therein lies the real problem. It is a political dilemma which requires a political solution, yet Indonesia's political process appears unable to respond. Jakarta seems locked into attempting a part economic, part military solution, racking up significant socio-economic gains in the province but doing nothing to diminish the alienation between rulers and ruled. The diplomatic minuet that brings representatives of Indonesia, Portugal and the UN together for international meetings may look promising to outsiders, but the locals remain sceptical because they see no sign of movement or involvement in real dialogue within ET itself. Their frustration is palpable.

15. Bishop Belo and Arlindo Marcal, among others, have called on the authorities to find ways of giving the East Timorese people a more effective voice in shaping their own future. That something along these lines needs to happen is fairly clear, at least in general terms. ***How*** it could be made to happen is the great perplexity, because at that point the problem of East Timor is entangled in the many different strands that make up the larger, more complex puzzle of the future of Indonesia itself.

CONCLUSION

16. The NCCA's representatives were deeply grateful for the invitation to give a human face to the concern of Australia's churches, acting in concert, for the people and churches of East Timor. We were blessed by the faith and faithfulness of those in East Timor whose lives touched ours. We urge the churches that comprise the NCCA to seize on every opportunity that may offer to provide support and encouragement for the churches of East Timor. And to be enriched by their support and encouragement in return.

John Bathersby, Ian George, Jill Tabart, David Gill